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Rousing the Facebook Crowd: Digital Enthusiasm and Emotional Contagion in the 2011 Protests in Egypt and Spain

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The activist use of Facebook pages in the 2011 movements of the Egyptian revolution and the Spanish Indignados saw phases of exponential growth in user engagement in proximity to key protest events, signaled by spikes in likes and comments. This article analyzes these episodes as *moments of digital enthusiasm* facilitated by emotional communication on political Facebook pages. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative analysis of Facebook data, I argue that two elements concurred to build moments of digital enthusiasm: (a) the hopeful narrative produced by activist admins managing political Facebook pages, and (b) the receptivity and cooperation of ordinary Internet users who overwhelmingly reinforced the message put forward by activist admins. This emotional dialogue between admins and users generated a process of emotional contagion that helped establish propitious psychological conditions for mass protest participation. Moments of digital enthusiasm demonstrate the power of social media and emotional communication in mass protest mobilization. However, they also highlight the risk of evanescence of collective action in a digital age.

Keywords: social media activism, emotional contagion, emotion work, Facebook, Egypt, Spain

Introduction

The assertion that “the 15M¹ [also known as Indignados] movement is an emotional mood” is heard frequently from veterans of the Spanish protest movement, a landmark event in the 2011 wave of protest that reached from the Arab world to the United States. This expression is above all a commentary on the experience of thousands of participants interacting face-to-face in physical public space within protest camps and popular assemblies. However, it also captures the intensely emotional character of the

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¹ The name “15M” or “15-M” derives from the movement’s starting date, May 15, 2011. References to 15M as an emotional mood are found in, e.g., the online list of definitions of the 15M movement, part of the 15Mpedia project. Retrieved from https://15mpedia.org/wiki/Lista_de_definiciones_del_15M

online conversations that took place on social media in preparation for the protests and during their physical unfolding. Months before Spanish protesters first appeared on the streets of Spain, digital activists were already using Twitter channels and Facebook pages to air impassioned denunciations about the wrongdoings of banks and politicians, and launch calls to action (Gerbaudo, 2012). In posts abounding in exclamations, smileys, and capital letters, activists aimed at conveying hope about the upcoming protests, as exemplified by status messages proclaiming that “the 15th of May is our day!” The majority of Internet users who subscribed to the page responded enthusiastically to these emotional communications, expressing their approval through likes, solidarity shares, and supportive comments. Impressive spikes in user engagement occurred immediately before and during the first day of protest on May 15 and the ensuing occupation of Puerta del Sol in central Madrid.

The explosion of user engagement in social media communications among the Spanish Indignados is a manifestation of the moments of digital enthusiasm that accompanied the preparation and unfolding of major protest events in the protest wave of 2011. I define moments of digital enthusiasm as necessarily transient phases of intense, positive emotional mood emerging in political online conversations in proximity to major protest events. During moments of digital enthusiasm, the interaction between admins and users—the “vanguards” and “crowds” of contemporary digital movements—took the form of an ascending spiral of collective emotional activation culminating in impressive spikes of user engagement. What factors are involved in the emergence of moments of digital enthusiasm? What do they say about social media’s contribution to mass protest mobilization?

To explore these issues, I propose a sociological analysis of the relationship between social media and mobilization in the 2011 protest movements. I focus on two highly influential activist Facebook pages: the KKS (We are all Khaled Said) Facebook page,² the most important communication channel in the Egyptian revolution of 2011; and the DRY (Real Democracy Now) Facebook page,³ an arm of the foremost protest organization in the Indignados movement in Spain. The choice to focus on Facebook rather than Twitter in this article stems from two considerations. First, even though Facebook has a far larger penetration globally, researchers’ greater interest in Twitter has left Facebook surprisingly little studied. Second, users involved in political conversations relevant to these protest events on Facebook far outnumbered those on Twitter (Gerbaudo, 2012).

To study conversations on these Facebook pages and their emotional features, I took a mixed methods approach comprising (a) quantitative data analytics to investigate the performance of these pages and the levels of user engagement over time, and (b) qualitative discourse analysis to explore the dominant themes and emotional content of text-based communication produced by Facebook admins, in the form of status messages, and by page users in the form of comments. Focusing on text-based communication rather than videos or images is justified by the importance of textual communication in social media: being often the primary medium of expression makes it an important subject of study in its own right. After providing an overview of the pages, the analysis “zooms in” on critical moments in the process of mobilization, in particular the peaks of user engagement that anticipated and accompanied the

² <https://www.facebook.com/ElShaheed>.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/AsociacionDRY>.

preparation and unfolding of key protest events: the January 25, 2011, protests in Egypt and the May 15, 2011, protests in Spain.

My analysis identifies two key factors in the emergence of moments of digital enthusiasm: (a) the "emotion work" (Hochschild, 1979) that page admins conducted by constructing a hopeful emotional narrative, and (b) the receptivity and cooperation of page users and their kindling of a process of "emotional contagion" (Barsade, 2002) that extended the page's reach and its level of emotional activation. First, the explosion of moments of digital enthusiasm was facilitated by the activist admins' adoption of a passionate style of expression aimed at instilling a sense of hope among page users. This positive communication was manifested in the use of motivational language and messages predicting the ultimate success of the movement. Second, moments of digital enthusiasm arose from the positive response of ordinary page users who overwhelmingly supported the narrative proposed by page admins, contributing to an impression of collective solidarity and resolve through avalanches of likes, solidarity shares, and supportive comments.

This positive emotional feedback loop between admins and page users was instrumental in mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people for action with little prior preparation by feeding a common perception of efficacy and power. Lacking the dependable organizational resources and structures of traditional protest organizations, these nascent movements relied on the multiplying power of emotional contagion to amass large online crowds of supporters and sympathizers that acted as an important pool of protest mobilization. On the downside, however, moments of digital enthusiasm were typically fickle, and levels of user engagement dropped rapidly in the aftermath of activity peaks on both the DRY and KKS pages.

The article begins by developing a theoretical framework for the analysis of digital enthusiasm. For this purpose, I draw on scholarship concerning emotion and collective psychology in social movement studies and social media studies. The following, empirical section (a) reconstructs the evolution of user engagement on these pages and the correspondence between peaks of online activity and key protest events, (b) analyzes status messages produced by activist admins, and (c) examines comments written by Internet users. The article concludes with an evaluative discussion of the broader significance and implications of moments of digital enthusiasm.

Social Media, Protest, and Emotional Contagion

Understanding moments of digital enthusiasm—intense occasions of online interaction in which the emotions of thousands of Web users fuse into a collective sense of possibility—requires rethinking the theories that inform the understanding of politics and communication in the digital age and the way social media is discussed as a new public space for discussion and participation. The problem with much of the current debate about social media and activism is that it takes an overly instrumentalist and behaviorist view of social media as a low-cost channel for the circulation of information (e.g., Earl & Kimport, 2011). To understand moments of digital enthusiasm that have emerged on political Facebook pages, I instead view communication as not simply a cognitive phenomenon but also an affective one that involves both emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) to transform and intensify emotional states, and emotional contagion,

the “transfer of moods among people in a group” (Barsade, 2002, p. 644). To develop this alternative emotional understanding of protest-related social media communications, I tap into the current revival of attention to emotions in both social movement studies and the emerging field of social media studies.

Emotions were for long a taboo subject in mainstream sociology because of their association with simplistic, dated theories of irrational crowd behavior (e.g., Le Bon, 1977). Nevertheless, in recent decades they have received increasing scholarly attention in the study of social movements. Building on the European tradition of study of “new social movements,” Alberto Melucci (1996) was the first to argue for a recuperation of emotions in social movement analysis, asserting that “there is no cognition without feeling and no meaning without emotion” (p. 71). More recently, American scholars have tried to incorporate emotions in their theoretical framework (e.g., Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001) to address the limits of hyper-rationalism in resource mobilization theory. James Jasper (1998) argued that “emotions pervade all social life, social movements included” (p. 398) and significantly affect the way social movements organize and mobilize.

Also, social psychological approaches proposed as an expansion of resource mobilization theory have increasingly accounted for the role of emotions in motivating protest participation. Scholars such as Bert Klandermans, who initially focused on instrumental motivations stemming from self-interest (Klandermans, 1984; Klandermans & Oegema, 1987), have progressively integrated issues of identity and later of emotions in their analyses. In this context, attention has focused on the role of “group-based anger” (Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & Van Dijk, 2011; Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013, p. 92), described as the “stereotypical protest emotion” (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013, p. 893) and an important predictor of protest participation.

This article focuses on the emotion of enthusiasm, defined as “strong excitement about something” or “a strong feeling of active interest in something that you like or enjoy” (“Enthusiasm,” 2014). Enthusiasm pertains to “moods,” a type of emotion alongside “reflex emotions” and “moral emotions.” Moods can be described as “diffuse affective reactions to general environmental stimuli” (Barsade, 2002, p. 646). Examples are optimism, pessimism, confidence, anxiety, and enthusiasm—emotions often found in social movements. They differ from “reflex emotions” (Jasper, 2011, p. 287) like anger, happiness, fear, and joy, which are more closely associated with biological states. Furthermore, they are distinct from “moral emotions,” which “arise out of complex understandings and moral awareness” (ibid.) and include compassion and indignation. While emotions are proverbially fickle and ever changing, compared to reflex emotions and moral emotions, moods are relatively more durable processes. They “are modular and transportable emotions” carried “from one situation to the next” (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2004, p. 421).

I chose to concentrate on enthusiasm in this article because, as I will show in the empirical section, this emotion is ubiquitous in protest-related social media communications and can be seen as a crucial resource for protest participation due to its connection with the construction of collective self-confidence and trust. As Bert Klandermans (1984) argued, collective self-confidence is a key factor in motivating targeted individuals to participate, since the perception that other people will participate in a protest action leads to additional participation. In the process of protest mobilization, the emergence of collective enthusiasm can

help dispel the apathy, fear, and distrust that can prevent protest participation (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987).

Internet and social media studies too have recently increased the attention paid to the issue of emotions, overcoming the erstwhile dominance of a more narrow cognitive focus and viewing the Internet as a space of information transmission (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Zizi Papacharissi (2014) has proposed that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have a strong emotional aspect, and that "digital, among other media, invite and transmit affect but also sustain affective feedback loops that generate and reproduce affective patterns of relating to others" (p. 23). The social media and emotions nexus is particularly important in the context of protest movements. In his book on the 2011 protests, Manuel Castells (2012) mentioned emotions of indignation and hope as key themes of social media communications. Merlyna Lim (2012) has similarly argued that the KKS Facebook page in Egypt fueled a "shared emotion" (p. 241) among young Egyptians. In my own book on social media and activism in the 2011 protest wave, I discussed how social media in Egypt, Spain, and the United States were involved the transformation of negative sentiments of anger and indignation into collective political passions informed by the hope of prevailing over an unjust political system (Gerbaudo, 2012). This article aims at furthering my theorizing of social media as a space of collective emotional processing.

The emergence of moments of digital enthusiasm can be analyzed as the result of two connected processes: emotional contagion (Barsade, 2002) and emotion work (Hochschild, 1979).

Researchers in social psychology and organizational studies have argued that emotions, like information, can be transmitted between individuals and groups, often producing a strong ripple effect, whereby the emotional states of given individuals have important consequences for the emotions of others (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). In an office, for example, emotions can be transferred horizontally between workers but also vertically from leadership to the base, as leaders' emotions appear to have strong effects on group emotions (Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005).

Initially developed for the study of face-to-face groups, the notion of emotional contagion has recently been adapted to the study of online communities or "distributed groups" (Guillory et al., 2011, p. 745). Researchers have shown that emotions expressed in Facebook status messages can significantly affect the sentiments of Facebook friends (e.g., Kramer, Guillory & Hancock, 2014). In a study famously criticized for its breach of ethical guidelines on informed consent, a group of researchers, some of whom part of the Facebook data science team, ran a massive social experiment to test whether the emotional quality of the content on the Facebook news feed influenced user messages (Kramer et al., 2014). They found that "emotional states can be transferred to others via emotional contagion, leading people to experience the same emotions without their awareness" (p. 8788). Online emotional contagion has also been shown to affect political participation. A large-scale study of Facebook during the 2010 U.S. election campaign demonstrated that exposure to declarations of voting on the social network site had a positive effect on voter participation (Bond et al., 2012).

Emotional contagion can be seen as intertwined with and ignited by a process of emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) performed by page admins trying to elicit a positive emotional response from page

users. Arlie Russell Hochschild (1979) defined emotion work as the process "of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling," which encompasses various practices of "evoking or shaping, as well as suppressing, feeling in oneself" (p. 561). This notion has been influential in debates about politics (Perry, 2002) and social movements (Goodwin & Pfaff, 2001). The concept can benefit the analysis of social media activism and of the connection between emotions and social media by allowing us to approach social media not simply as a means of transmission of certain emotional states, as the idea of emotional contagion implies, but also as a space that qualitatively shapes collective emotional states. Emotion work transforms certain emotions into others (e.g., fear into hope) and intensifies emotional states, thus creating the conditions necessary for the spread of emotional contagion.

An understanding of the nexus between emotion work and emotional contagion in online campaigns must account for the hierarchical structure of Facebook fan pages. Existing scholarship has often emphasized the nature of social media as highly interactive and participatory spaces,, allowing for greater grassroots participation than predigital mass media do (e.g., Castells, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013). However, this interactive and participatory character of social media communications does not mean the Internet is a truly horizontal space.

Facebook pages are in fact characterized by a strong hierarchy in which leadership, far from being eliminated, acquires new forms (Gerbaudo, 2012; Poell, Abdulla, Rieder, Woltering, & Zack, 2015). Facebook fan pages display a strongly asymmetrical architecture of participation (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013) most glaringly evident in the presence of two distinct categories of participants: admins and ordinary users. Admins are in a superior position, as they are able to do several things ordinary users cannot do: post status messages, open photo galleries or events, ban certain users from the page, and so on. Ordinary users have room to influence the page's content, but to a much lesser degree than page admins. They can contribute to page content only by using interactive features such as liking, sharing, and commenting, which generate aggregate information about the popularity of a page and specific contents (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), as well as via the content (texts, pictures, and videos) of their comments or user posts on the page (where admins allow such an option).

Thus, rather than a level playing field, the communication conducted on Facebook fan pages reflects the classic organizational division between leaders and participants, with a "vanguard" of admins taking the lead in communicating certain messages, and the "crowd" of ordinary users reacting to these messages more or less cooperatively by positively sanctioning the communications and reinforcing them, or by ignoring or countering them. In this context, the process of emotion work that ignites the dynamics of emotional contagion and leads to the emergence of moments of digital enthusiasm is thus largely in the hands of Facebook page admins. Users' interventions are mostly limited to the binary choices of supporting or not supporting user-proposed content and connected lines of action, either with likes and shares or with the positive or negative emotional content of their comments.

Methodology

This article stems from a long-term research project about social media and activism in the 2011 wave of popular protest. My focus here is on the protest movements in Egypt and Spain and on two popular Facebook pages: the KKS page in the case of the Egyptian revolution and the DRY page in the case of the Indignados movement. These two Facebook pages were selected for analysis because their large followings and their impact on connected protest movements make them bearers of some of the clearest examples of the possibilities social media offer for the purposes of mobilizing protests.

To analyze these Facebook pages, I adopted a mixed methods approach combining quantitative data analysis and discourse analysis of select Facebook status messages and user comments, focusing particularly on periods of intense activity, such as those preceding key protest events. Using the open-source network analysis software Netvizz,⁴ which produces a tabular file from the Facebook Application Programme Interface (API), I obtained status messages, comments, and various metrics for the periods between June 2010 and December 2011 in the case of the KKS page and between February 2011 and December 2011 for the DRY page. I quantitatively analyzed the temporal progression of user engagement on the page through the production of a time series in Excel and Tableau. I also conducted qualitative analysis of all the status messages and comments for the given periods. I am proficient in both Spanish and Egyptian Arabic, the languages of the two Facebook pages analyzed.

Enthusiastic Conversations

To capture the dynamics of moments of digital enthusiasm on Facebook pages, I propose a three-step analytical discussion. First, I will analyze the general history and performance of the page by looking at the evolution of user engagement, measured in typical Web 2.0 metrics such as likes, comments, and shares. Both Facebook pages displayed a pattern of exponential growth in user engagement upon the advent of specific protest events, followed by a progressive decline. Second, I will explore the nature of the communication channeled through the Facebook pages in preparation for protest events by identifying different elements of the emotion work pursued by page admins. I will discuss the use of various rhetorical artifices: exclamation marks, capitalized words, and smileys, as well as a prophetic tone used to predict the ultimate success of the mobilization. Third, I will analyze the user response and the content of comments reacting to status messages, demonstrating that the explosion of moments of digital enthusiasm was facilitated by highly supportive interactions and comments from ordinary users.

A Momentous Rise

The language of virality and explosion that has become a stereotypical feature of discussions of Internet phenomena (Sampson, 2012) is quite appropriate for analyzing the performance of the KKS Facebook page in Egypt and the DRY page in Spain. A rapid rise-and-fall pattern in user engagement was characteristic of both Facebook pages, as displayed in Figures 1 and 2. After an initial period of relatively

⁴ <https://apps.facebook.com/netvizz>.

slow growth, both pages experienced rapid acceleration of user engagement in proximity to major protest events. After the activity peaked, a slow decline ensued as user engagement progressively tailed off.

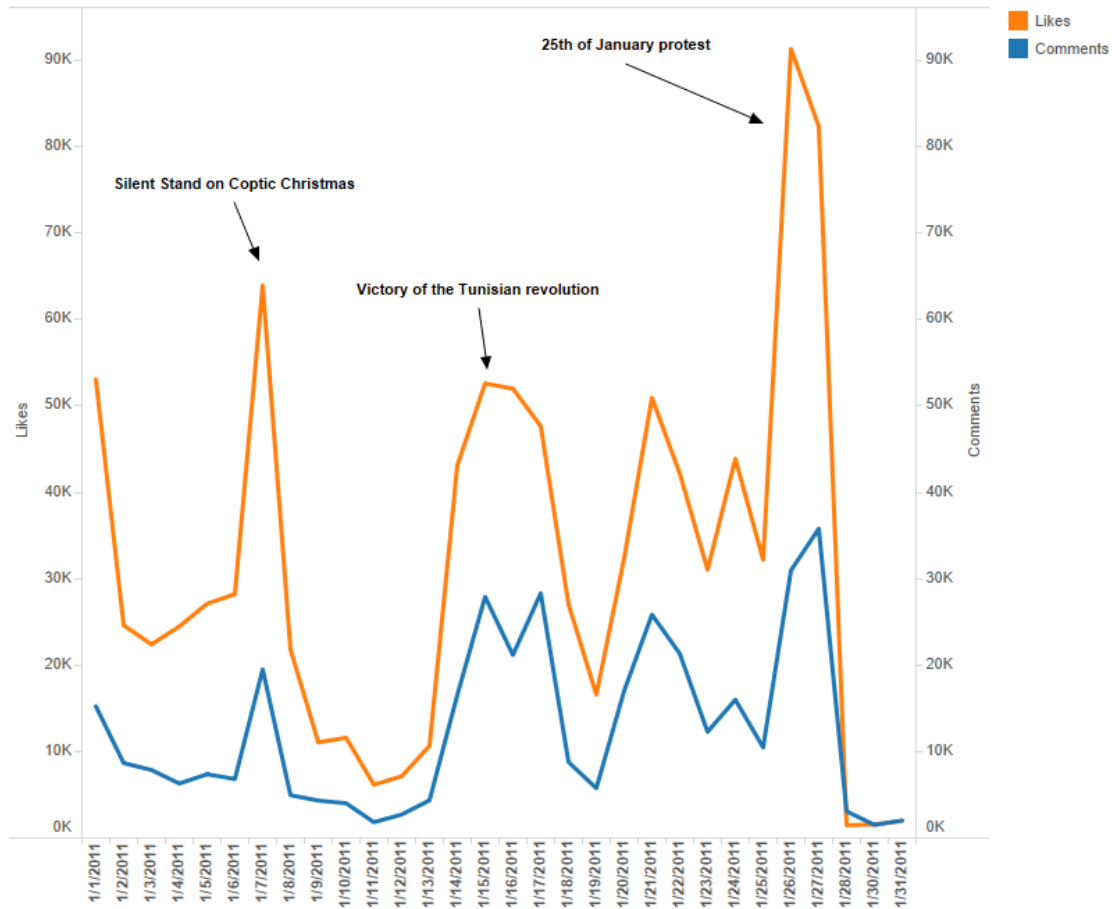


Figure 1. Number of KKS Facebook page status message likes and comments, January 2011.

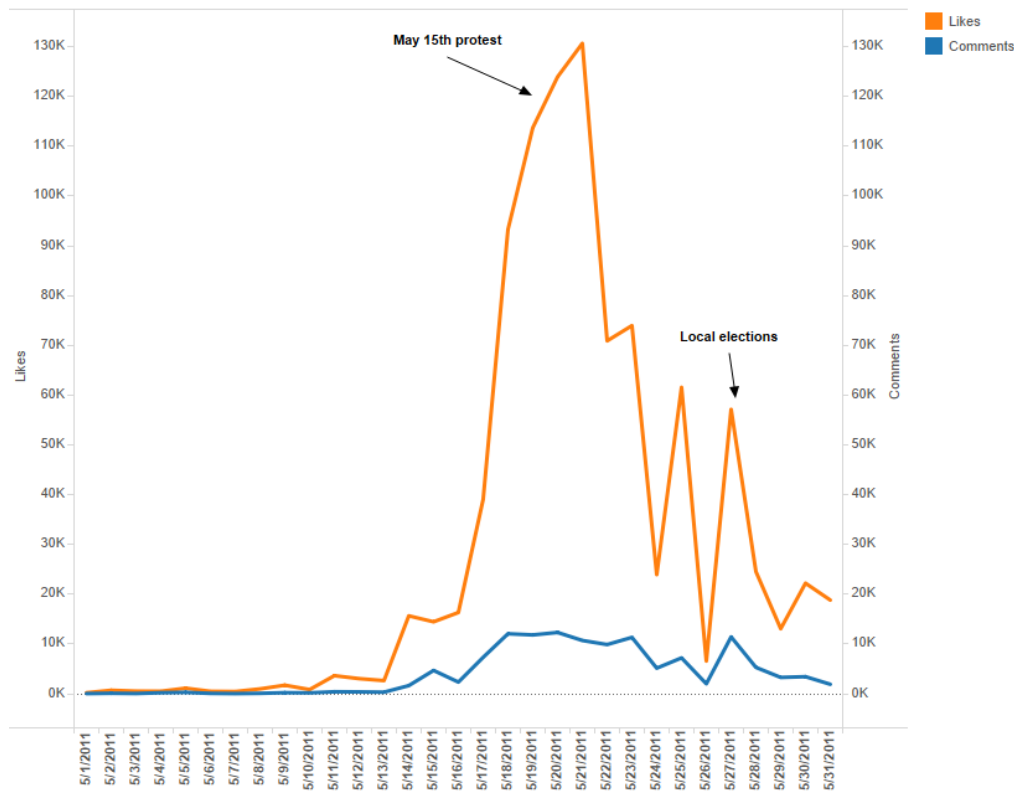


Figure 2. Number of Democrazia Real Ya Facebook page status message likes and comments, May 2011.

The KKS Facebook page was founded in June 2010 on the initiative of Egyptian activist and Google marketing executive for the Middle East, Wael Ghonim. The page took its name from Khaled Said, a 28-year-old Alexandrian man beaten to death by two security officers. Initially, the page's main purpose was to call for truth about Said's murder and prosecution of the perpetrators. Several silent vigils were held in the summer of 2010 to raise awareness about these issues. However, soon the page was voicing a broader set of Egyptian citizens' grievances about corruption, freedom of expression, unemployment, and the environment, among other issues. Having accrued a large following, it eventually became the main channel of publicity for the January 25 protest that inaugurated the Egyptian revolution of 2011, with this first protest event launched directly from the page through a dedicated Facebook event.

Examining the evolution of user engagement, the first notable element is that the KKS page started with a veritable bang—30,000 likes on its very first day in June 2010. Up to the year's end it experienced steady growth with ups and downs coinciding with a number of small protest actions in Cairo and Alexandria publicized by the page. However, the real explosion of the page came at the beginning of 2011, largely as a consequence of the successful Tunisian revolution. The month of January saw three

main spikes in user engagement (Figure 1). The first spike was around January 7 coinciding with a silent stand in solidarity with Coptic Christian community who had recently suffered a terrorist attack. The second spike in mid-January coincides with Dictator Ben Ali's exit from Tunisia. The third spike covers the eve and unfolding of the protest of January 25, 2011, at the outset of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. After this spike, the graph shows a dramatic drop in user engagement caused by an Internet blackout imposed by the Egyptian government on January 27, 2011, as a last-resort measure to halt the rise of the protest movement. User engagement grew again in early February once the Internet was reactivated; Hosni Mubarak was eventually ousted on February 11. However, the page reached its highest peak of user engagement after the revolution, with the constitutional referendum of March 19, 2011. After this event, user engagement on the page began to trail off and never returned to the levels experienced at the beginning of 2011.

The Spanish DRY Facebook page was much inspired by the Egyptian case and the KKS Facebook page. It was set up in March 2011 by a group of people of different political backgrounds who nonetheless shared concerns about the economic crisis, staggering levels of unemployment, and political corruption. Alongside various Twitter activist accounts the page acted as the central mobilizing platform in preparations for the May 15, 2011 protests that marked the birth of the Indignados/15M movement in Spain, a mass mobilization that developed in hundreds of protest camps, assemblies, and protest actions all over Spain. Activists used the page to raise awareness about bankers' responsibility for the explosion of the economic crisis and about numerous cases of corruption of politicians, as well as to publicize large protest events, starting with the May 15 protest. Compared with the KKS fan page, the DRY Facebook had a slower initial build-up: it took several days to reach the magnitude of thousands of users that the KKS page attained on its first day. However, considering that the DRY Facebook page had less time before the decisive protest event—three months instead of seven—the page's performance was also very impressive. User engagement experienced exponential growth in the days immediately preceding the protests of 15 May, 2011, peaking in the ensuing days and slowly trailing off as of the end of May (Figure 2). This drop in user engagement reflects how, upon the movement's "materialization" in the occupied public squares, the page lost much of its former centrality in the media ecology of the Indignados movement in the second half of 2011.

What admin and user behaviors corresponded to these peaks of activity? How did they help fuel collective enthusiasm in protest-related online conversations?

Status Messages of Hope

"The most important objective was to inspire *hope in the hearts* of all page members and everyone who participated" (Ghonim, 2012, p. 81). This sentence, taken from Wael Ghonim's memoir of his activity as an admin of the KKS Facebook page, illustrates the connection between conversations developing on the Facebook page and the process of emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) that facilitated the emergence of moments of digital enthusiasm. Given the multiple objectives of these Facebook pages—such as information, raising awareness, discussion and mobilization—status messages were quite diverse in both form (text-only posts, links, pictures, videos, notes) and substance. However, delving into the language of these messages reveals a clear pattern of dominance of an intensely positive motivational

communication aimed at encouraging Internet users to participate actively in online conversations and ultimately in mass protest. Avoiding the factual, objective language of news reports and reasoned debate, status message adopted an exuberant style with several mobilizing rhetorical artifices, including the use of (a) exhortative expressions to explicitly call on people to pursue certain actions, (b) online conversational tropes such as exclamation points, smileys, and capitalized letters to conjure a contagious sense of community and euphoria, and (c) a prophetic tone exemplified by messages predicting with certainty the success of upcoming mobilizations and implicitly demanding a leap of faith from page users.

The “enthusing” character of status messages on the KKS Facebook page is unambiguous. At their core, these often personal and passionate messages attempted to emphasize positive elements of hope over negative sentiments of anger and fear. This hopeful narrative was perfectly condensed in a slogan posted as part of a status message on January 25: “Let’s make it happen Egyptians, wake your spirit. . . . The gates of liberty are open” (Ghonim, 2012, p. 169). Whereas status messages necessarily dwelt on various grievances raised by the movement, from police corruption to poverty and environmental problems, care was always taken to emphasize the redemptive possibilities of mass protest and the valor and pride of the Egyptian people. The emotional quality of status messages intensified as the protest date of January 25, assuming a tone that can be described as “prophetic”, since it was used in ambitious predictions about the future and the movement’s outcomes. For example, the status message posted on the morning of January 25 proclaimed with certainty that “today we are going to prove that we are not guys of ‘Comment and like’ as they claim. We are REALITY on Earth we are demanding our rights and we are all participating” (Ghonim, 2012, p. 146).

Facebook page admins also used Facebook popularity metrics to show users how collective support for the protest campaign was growing. Thus, a message posted a few days before January 25 commented on the enthusiastic response to the Facebook event for the day of protest:

I never saw this on Facebook before . . . The Jan25 invitation reached 500,000 Facebook users . . . 27,000 have RSVPed. . . . People in the villages must know there is a solution . . . That we will take action and say “No.” . . . That we demand our rights. . . . Let’s do this Egyptians. . . . Let’s show the world that we are not cowards and that we are ready to sacrifice anything for our rights. (Ghonim, 2012, p. 143)

Web 2.0 metrics were utilized as an approximate measure of the support of ordinary users for the page, a demonstration of the resonance of the admins’ message, and of many ordinary Egyptians’ genuine commitment to participating in protest action, thus contributing to the construction of collective self-confidence.

The status messages on the DRY Facebook page during the lead-up to the May 15 protest were analogous to those on the KKS page. Admin posts adopted a motivational style meant to stir positive emotions among Internet users in different ways. First, like the KKS admins, the DRY admins used conversational tropes often seen in private online conversations, including emoticons, capitalization (translating into a shout), and a profusion of exclamation marks. Furthermore, DRY admins often posted exhortative expressions that explicitly called on people to participate in protest actions, as well as

prophetic expressions affirming trust in the ultimate victory of the movement. For example, on April 12 the admins posted a map of different local protests and wrote, "Protests are growing like mushrooms in the entire country!"⁵ Whereas on April 28, 2011, they wrote: "The moment of revolution has come 15th of May. Let's all take to the streets."⁶ In many such messages, the admins' reference to social media metrics such as page likes serve to demonstrate that their apparently hyperbolic predictions about the coming success of the movement were in fact well founded. On April 10, they wrote, "We already have 20,000 thousand indignant followers on Facebook!"⁷ And on April 26, the admin announced, "We are already 30,000 indignants confirming their participation in the state event!! Invite your contact and let's continue growing!!!"⁸ As was so for the KKS page, admins in Spain used popularity metrics as proof of the truth of their promise of a vast mobilization capable of achieving systemic social change.

Euphoric User Responses

For all its exuberance, the motivational communication produced by activist admins would have had little effect, had it not been for the receptivity and cooperation of ordinary Internet users. Given the communicative architecture of social networks and their emphasis on interactivity, user response was critical to ensuring the success of the emotional communication channeled on Facebook and to broadening its organic reach beyond users who directly subscribed to the page. The visibility of page content was enhanced by the rise in likes, solidarity shares, and comments, which made the content of these pages also visible on the timelines of the Facebook friends of page users. Spikes in user engagement attracted new users to the page and contributed to redoubling the hopeful narrative advanced by the page admins. Furthermore, the supportive content of comments written by Internet users contributed in validating the narrative put forward by activist admins.

On the KKS Facebook page, users' receptivity was evidence in the repetition or paraphrasing of key slogans or in more creative ways, for example by coining new slogans and posting images, including Internet memes, in the comments. Not all user responses were positive. Some page users, including suspected pro-government trolls, replied with snide remarks to the admin messages. Furthermore, other users raised doubts about the actual strength of the still-phantom movement and the real intentions of page users. However, the admins' active rebuttals kept these messages from dispelling the overall positive climate of the conversations.

The supportive character of user interactions on the KKS page is exemplified by the avalanche of euphoric comments posted on January 14, 2011, the day of the Tunisian revolution, an event that further strengthened Egyptians' sense of possibility about a revolution in their own country. One user stated, "The Tunisian people succeeded in overthrowing the thieves. We need to repeat the same phenomenon here in

⁵ "Las convocatorias aparecen como las setas en todo el pas!!!" April 12, 2011.

⁶ "Ha llegado el momento de la revolución 15 de Mayo todxs a la calle!" April 28, 2011.

⁷ "Ya tenemos a mas de 20.000 seguidores indignados en facebook!" April 10, 2011.

⁸ "Ya somos 30.000 indignados confirmando nuestra asistencia en el evento estatal!! Invita a tus contactos y sigamos creciendo!!!" April 26, 2011.

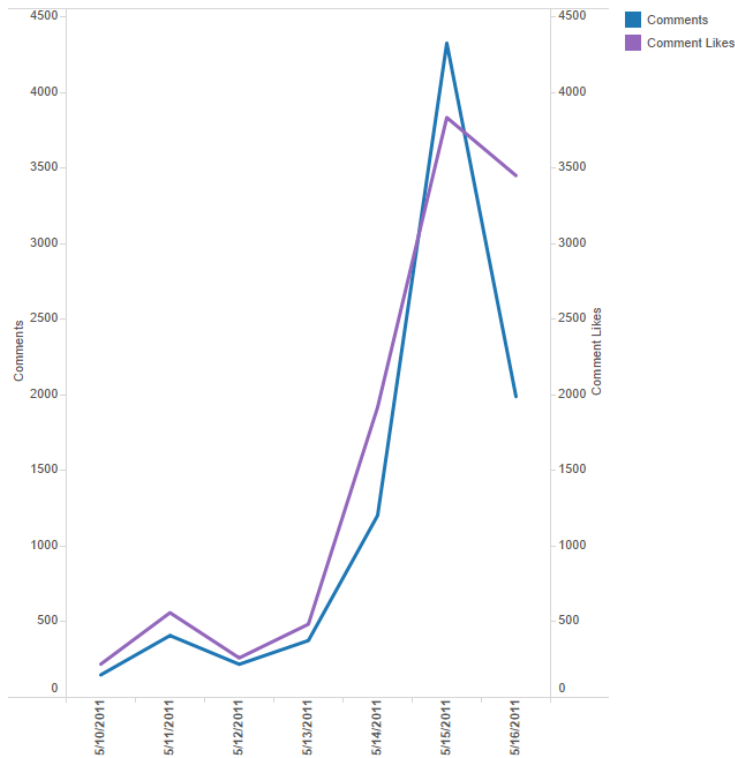


Figure 4. DRY Facebook page comment and comment likes count May 10–16, 2011.

Comments by Internet users on the DRY Facebook page (Figure 4) were similar to those on the KKS page. In anticipation of the protests of May 15, 2011, comments were dominated by highly sympathetic messages that expressed clear support for the online campaign, as seen in the abundance of positive expressions: “I am coming,”¹³ “Let’s go!”¹⁴ “Let’s all stand together,”¹⁵ “It was time!”¹⁶ and “Courage!”¹⁷ A post on May 13 reported that 600 organizations supported the protest on May 15, and a user affirmed, “This is it, we need to continue waging war, this does not have to stop!”¹⁸ while another wrote, “Real power resides in the people.”¹⁹ The tone and content of comments written on May 14, 2011, was similar. Page users reacted to a support letter by Spanish economist José Luis Sampedro, posted as a Facebook note with a barrage of supportive comments. One user asserted that “we will light the fuse, we

¹³ “Ya llevo.” April 12, 2011.

¹⁴ “Vamos!!!” April 26, 2011.

¹⁵ “Estamos unidos!” April 28, 2011.

¹⁶ “Ya era hora!” April 29, 2011.

¹⁷ “Animo!” May 9, 2011.

¹⁸ “Eso es, hay q seguir dando guerra, esto ya no debe parar!!!” May 13, 2011.

¹⁹ “El verdadero poder reside en el pueblo” May 13, 2011.

need to take charge of our destiny, they cannot silence us, thank you teacher!"²⁰ Another congratulated the Internet crowd: "Thank you very much for your great support!! The resistance will not stop growing and gathering every civic support to overcome the tyranny."²¹ Thus the content of user comments reinforced from the bottom-up the top-down narrative proposed by the admins and strongly contributed to creating a favorable climate of hope and reciprocal trust—the kind known to be propitious for facilitating protest participation (Klandermans, 1984; Klandermans & Oegema, 1987).

The Contagious Power of Enthusiastic Online Crowds

The analysis of the DRY and KKS Facebook fan pages highlights the correlation between peaks of user engagement and intense emotional conversations involving page admins and ordinary Internet users who form the online "vanguards" and "crowds" of contemporary protest movements (Gerbaudo, 2014b). Moments of digital enthusiasm emerge when interactions between page admins and users acquire the form of a positive, self-reinforcing feedback loop. Thereby the messages conveyed by the admins are redoubled by the users through likes and shares as well as supportive comments, leading to yet more positive, hopeful messages by admins and, in turn, yet more positive responses by page users in an ascending emotional spiral, culminating in climaxes of user engagement in proximity to major protest events.

This process of emotional contagion contributed heavily to the sense of collective hope and possibility infused in Web users in preparation for mass off-line protest action. It would be impossible to understand the enthusiasm witnessed in the physical gatherings of protesters in Tahrir Square and Puerta del Sol without taking into account the digital enthusiasm experienced by thousands of Internet users in the online conversations that preceded and accompanied these protest events. As I argued in my previous work, Facebook pages acted as a training ground for many protest participants, infusing them with a sense of hope and collective trust, without which they would have been less likely to participate in protest action (Gerbaudo, 2012). Political Facebook pages acted as spaces of assembly of online crowds that, united and motivated by a sense of collective enthusiasm, often went on to manifest themselves as off-line protest crowds.

This article's findings confirm many elements of social psychology scholarship on social movements and its emphasis on collective self-confidence as a predictor of protest participation (Klandermans, 1984; Klandermans & Oegema, 1987; Oegema & Klandermans, 1994). Rather than acting simply as a means of circulating information, social media was also a key means of motivation that allowed organizers to infuse prospective participants with a sense of possibility and collective trust, and to dispel negative emotions like fear and suspicion. These hopeful messages and the page users' enthusiastic response were instrumental in convincing otherwise recalcitrant and dispersed constituencies to make that leap of faith.

²⁰ "vamos a prender la mecha, tenemos que tomar las riendas de nuestro destino, no nos podran callar, gracias maestro!!" May 14, 2011.

²¹ "Muchas gracias por su gran apoyo!! La resistencia no cesará, seguiremos creciendo y recavando todo el respaldo civil posible para vencer a la tiranía." May 14, 2011.

Moments of digital enthusiasm reflect the specificities of social media and the new opportunities and challenges they present for protest mobilization. The inordinate emphasis movement leaders placed on what could be termed *enthusiasm work*—the deliberate fueling of collective enthusiasm through the use of highly emotionally positive messages—can be understood as an attempt to cope with the limits of online protest mobilization. As Sidney Tarrow (1998) has argued, trust is one of the hardest things to win in online communication among Internet users. Social movements in the past were deeply embedded in local face-to-face communities. Internet users start instead from a situation of physical dispersion and anonymity, where ascertaining the real motivations of other users is more difficult and developing reciprocal trust is more problematic (Turkle, 2013). The admins' resort to an exuberantly positive message and even to prophetic expressions can be understood as stemming from awareness of such difficulties and the intention to overcome them.

In the process of emotional contagion observed during moments of digital enthusiasm, interactive features such as likes, shares, and comments were exploited for the purpose of protest diffusion (González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer, Rivero, & Moreno, 2011). Social media use facilitated a distributed and capillary process of emotional contagion that reached well beyond the initial subscribers to a specific Facebook page, helping to expand the user base of the political Facebook pages. Moments of digital enthusiasm would not have emerged without the receptivity and cooperation of ordinary users, who contributed significantly to the spread of political Facebook pages' messages.

User interactions, which come to act as an aggregate expression of support for the content proposed by admins, measured by Web 2.0 metrics (Gerbaudo, 2014), often appeared in the guise of reaction and "acclamation" rather than qualitative modification of the content of conversations, resembling feedback mechanisms seen in traditional crowds, such as clapping, jeering, booing, and similar expressions of support or disapproval.

The significant contribution of ordinary Internet users in the development of online conversations should not encourage overestimation of their influence. The direction of conversations was in fact still largely controlled by page admins, who were able to set the agenda of discussion topics and make crucial decisions such as setting protest dates. The emotion work conducted by page admins adopted typical online marketing tactics to capture user attention and engagement (Poell et al., 2015). For example, Wael Ghonim, the main admin of the KKS Facebook page, is a marketing expert who consciously used a marketing paradigm in planning his online campaign, as he noted in his memoir (2012).

The emotional contagion seen on political Facebook pages constituted an important resource for the DRY and KKS protest groups, which lacked robust organizational structures. Appealing to user emotionality by emphasizing positive emotions and intensifying them, activist admins managed to tap into a collective energy and a mass online participation that was instrumental in fueling the process of emotional contagion and harnessing the collective commitment needed for successful mobilization. Moments of digital enthusiasm were facilitated by the emphasis of social networks on positive content as signaled by the absence of "unlike" buttons on Facebook and its framing of a space as "friendship", as well as the fact that positive content appears to possess a stronger emotional contagion than negative content (Kramer et al., 2014), when compared with offline groupings. Activists intelligently exploited this bias of

social networks and the Facebook news feed algorithms' inherent capacity for viral diffusion, which was more conducive to organic reach at the time these movements emerged (Dow, Adamic, & Friggeri, 2013), to engineer a process of emotional contagion that helped motivate Internet users to participate in protest action.

The downside of the viral character of online mobilization has been the evanescence of moments of digital enthusiasm. Despite these pages' momentous growth, they have also been characterized by a common tendency to fizzle out in the aftermath of decisive protest events, which parallels their connected movements' more general tendency toward evanescence (Kreiss & Tufekci, 2013). The history of protest movements has shown that phases of enthusiasm are almost invariably followed by moments of depression as the movement declines. Social media, with their inherent liquidity and their emphasis on the present and "liveness," can be seen as further exacerbating this tendency toward obsolescence. Furthermore, Facebook pages like KKS and DRY have focused on building up collective enthusiasm towards specific days of protest: January 25, 2011, for the Egyptian revolution, and May 15, 2011, for the Spanish Indignados. This event-focused framing has contributed to the short-term quality of social media communication, facilitating rapid exhaustion of the positive emotional energy previously accumulated by protest movements. The risk is that social media activism might contribute to rapid cycles of enthusiasm and disillusionment that might in turn just end up reinforcing the present state of political cynicism. These problems call for a strategic reflection about possible ways to "routinize" digital enthusiasm and turn it into a basis for more durable organizational structures and more lasting forms of belonging and commitment.

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